

Thai Trade Center Los Angeles News

For Immediate Release
December 21, 2009

For more information, contact:
Global Communicators, 202-371-9600
 Kristine Heine, kheine@globalcommunicators.com, or
 Jennifer Heuer, jenniferheuer@globalcommunicators.com

Thai Ingredients Can Add Zest and Health to Everyday Fare

LOS ANGELES, CA -- Americans looking for an easy way to add zest and health to their meals should take a page or two from professional and amateur Thai chefs.

Exotically versatile Thai condiments such as roasted chili jam or chili paste, fish sauce, and curry pastes; fresh Thai fruits such as tamarind, young coconut, and pineapple; and other Thai products such as shrimp and tropical fruit juices abound in many grocery stores as well as Asian markets these days. Incorporating some of these ingredients, many of which are high in vitamins and other essential nutrients, into every day cooking is simple and delightfully delicious, according to Jet Tila, executive chef of Wazuzu restaurant at the Wynn Encore in Las Vegas.

Chef Jet, sometimes referred to as "Thai Food Ambassador to the Americas," suggests Americans use Thai Hom Mali jasmine rice as their standard rice. This medium-grain rice is delicious when used in pilafs, stuffing for poultry, and rice. An added bonus is that rice and rice noodles are gluten-free.

Chef Jet replaces salt with fish sauce to marinade meat and seafood and to flavor soups, stews, stir fries, and other dishes. He uses Thai chili paste to jazz up such American regional cuisine as barbecue, Creole, and southwest cooking.

Coconut milk and coconut cream are delicious alternatives to dairy products in desserts, including coconut "ice cream." Chef Jet also adds coconut milk to soup for a creamy and slightly sweet taste and coconut water for a refreshing sweet flavor with far fewer calories. Coconut milk is the base for many Thai curries and can be used instead of yogurt to create a velvety, somewhat sweeter sauce.

Amateur cook Chantira Vivatrat, director of the Thai Trade Center, Los Angeles, offers other suggestions on inserting Thai flavors into conventional American cuisine.

For salads, she replaces traditional mayonnaise or oil-based dressing with Thai versions that are low in calories because they do not use oil. Her **Thai Roasted Chili Jam Salad Dressing** is a combination of Thai roasted chili jam, lime juice, Thai fish sauce, sugar, and coconut milk. Top the salad with crispy shallots and garlic.

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Create a **Sweet Chili Sauce Dressing** by combining sweet Thai chili sauce, lime juice, and Thai fish sauce, or make **Tamarind Salad Dressing** from tamarind water, palm sugar, and fish sauce. Experiment to determine the measurements you prefer or consult a Thai cook book or Thai food Web site, such as Chef Jet's <http://www.encorelasvegas.com/#/dining/wazuzu>.

Instead of mayonnaise or butter, Ms. Vivatrat spreads roasted chili jam, also called chili paste, on a sandwich and on toast for a sweet and spicy snack.

Spoon a small amount of roasted chili jam into canned or homemade chicken soup to add some "wow," she suggests. Create a lively, low-calorie vegetable dip by whisking together Thai chili jam, lime juice, or vinegar, and a small amount of water or vegetable stock.

Sprinkle tamarind fruit, in the form of sauce, water, or juice, instead of lemon or lime on grilled fish or other seafood for a slightly citrusy sour taste.

Create refreshing tropical drinks by combining such juices as lychee, mango, roselle, or tamarind with ginger ale, and top with thin slices of lemon. Serve them with or without alcohol, as you prefer.

Like most Thai cooks, Ms. Vivatrat doesn't use exact measurements but rather adjusts the amount of ingredients to suit her preferences and those of her family and guests. "We also always have condiments on the table, so you can be your own chef and adjust the tastes to the way you like it," she says.

Chef Jet suggests enhancing the flavors of favorite barbecue recipes and holiday sauces by incorporating sweet chili sauce or any other Thai chili sauce. He also says fish sauce makes an excellent salty seasoning that can replace salt in any savory dish. Fish sauce adds a distinctive aroma and meaty taste often referred to as "umami," a key flavor in Thai and other Asian foods.

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